Md. man is authority on JFK, King deaths

By EDWARD L. KENNEY
Staff reporter

FREDERICK, Md. — Experience as a reporter on the old Morning News in Wilmington helped Harold Weisberg amass one of the world's largest private collections of documents on the assassinations of President Kennedy and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

But today's news is that Weisberg, 79, recently arranged to will those documents — a third of a million pages obtained through the Freedom of Information Act — to Hood College in his hometown west of Baltimore. It is a fitting end for tons of hard copy that was hard-won in legal tug of wars fought since 1970 with "stonewalling" government officials.

"What I was doing — except on a much larger scale — was what reporters do," said Weisberg, who worked briefly for The News Journal Co.'s morning paper in the early 1930s before pursuing other professions. "I guess altogether I filed about a dozen suits and several of them lasted about 10 years. And, boy, can they wear you out that way."

On the day Weisberg talked by phone about his documents — most of the 60-plus file cabinets containing government memorandums and other papers are housed in his basement — a producer and camera crew from the Fox TV network had spent several hours taping at his home. "They're thinking of doing a special on the assassination of Dr. King," he said.

Media attention is nothing new to Weisberg. "At the time of the 25th anniversary of the Kennedy assassination, there might've been at least 25 TV crews here alone, and that was just TV," he said. "I can't tell you how many reporters and book writers were here."

The Wilmington High and University of Delaware grad also is a book writer — he's written six on the Kennedy assassination and one on the King assassination — and he cites author research as one reason he has gone after the documents. "I had two reasons for wanting the files. I wanted to use them in my own writing and I wanted them available for others to use."

AP

Harold Weisberg shows his collection of documents on the Kennedy and King assassinations.

Weisberg, who once served as a Senate investigator on violations of free speech and the rights of labor, also became an investigator for King's assassin, James Earl Ray. The interest grew in part because, like alleged Kennedy assassin Lee Harvey Oswald, Ray — who pleaded guilty — never got his day in court. "It seemed to me, with a live defendant, it was a way of seeing the American criminal justice system work. Guilt or innocence were immaterial. I spent days on end with him inside the maximum-security jails," where Weisberg did form an opinion. "I am absolutely convinced that he could not have been convicted at trial."

Weisberg obtained most of his information on the King and Kennedy assassinations from the FBI. He originally went after specific documents. "I began that way and the FBI stonewalled it and I had to go after all-inclusive requests."

Why does he think the government dragged its feet? "First of all, it's a way of making the [Freedom of Information] Act cumbersome and hard to use. They also stonewalled because they didn't want to give out the information."

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Sometimes the information it did give out was so heavily censored it was rendered useless. "Some of that is proper," Weisberg said. "National security, of course, is an important consideration."

But, he added, "Very often it's information that's an embarrassment to the government. You would be surprised by the things they cook up to claim national security."

One of the most revealing pieces of evidence he uncovered was a memorandum from Nicholas De B. Katzenbach, the deputy attorney general at the time of the Kennedy assassination. "What he said [in the memo] was the country has to be convinced that Oswald was the assassin. That was on Sunday afternoon; Kennedy was killed on Friday."

For all Weisberg's delving, he has steered clear of conspiracy theories.

"He's not a theorist," says David R. Wrone, a professor of history at the University of Wisconsin-Stevenspoint. "He doesn't believe in the who-did-it. He believes — and I think it's quite correct — in the facts."

Wrone, who has written "a major bibliography on the Kennedy assassination," has "used Weisberg's files quite a bit. Authors of books, writers of articles, people call him all the time to verify authenticity of quotes. I have no question that he is the premier authority on the Kennedy and King assassinations."

"It's the largest private collection on Kennedy material in the world," agrees Gerald McKnight, professor of history at Hood College. "As a private citizen, I think he's gotten more information from the government than anyone alive."

McKnight, who teaches a course called "The Politics of Assassination," served as a go-between with Weisberg and Hood College President Martha E. Church to bring the collection here. The college opened a new library last year, and McKnight said much of Weisberg's material will be "put on fiber optics."

Weisberg, whose sister Elma Handelman lives in Wilmington, said his information will also be shared with other libraries.

"That pleases me," he said, "because now they're going to be available for everybody."